

Instituting A Neighborhood Resident Leadership Certificate Program

Collaboration in Des Moines Prepares Neighborhood Leaders to Take On a Community Change Agenda

In the fall of 2007, Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) launched the **Neighborhood Resident Leadership Certificate Program**. Offering formal leadership training customized to the unique needs of urban neighborhoods and residents is a first for DMACC, and the process that went into designing the curriculum was just as notable.

A broad range of community partners – residents, The City of Des Moines, Des Moines, nonprofit organizations, schools and universities -- working with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative – were committed to resident leadership as key to changing outcomes for vulnerable children and families living in isolated neighborhoods.

They designed the certificate in close partnership with resident and neighborhood leaders to provide the training and tools residents need to help neighborhoods achieve results through smart use of data, strategic planning, effective meetings, and developing partnerships with the public and private sector.

Core leadership courses emphasize communicating for results, leading through conflict and change, and fundamental leadership skills. Electives included classes in results based accountability, neighborhood board development, volunteer recruitment and training, effective meeting participation and leadership, and landlord/tenant issues. Some electives were taught by residents.

Residents earn the certificate when they complete 24 hours of core courses, and 16 hours of elective. In just its first year, demand for the program was high. In 2007, residents took a total of 90 classes in the Fall, and 254 classes in Spring 2008. And five residents completed 40 hours of courses and graduated, a number DMACC officials say will increase significantly when last year's numbers are tallied. One graduate of the program has been elected to a position with his neighborhood association, another has used the skills in a supervisory position with a local nonprofit.

Scholarships for tuition (core courses cost about \$65 each) and books made the program accessible to low income residents. Classes were aggressively marketed using brochures, targeted mailings, news releases, church bulletins, posters and flyers.

Yet the process of developing an idea and transforming it into a tangible program took a great deal of time and effort. The following pages seek to capture the process and distill lessons for other communities wanting to collaborate to institutionalize this vital part of any effort to transform tough neighborhoods and improve the lives and life chances of those who live, work, and worship in them.

I. Bringing partners together: "We could do more together."

A 2005 community revitalization study found that, while the network of more than 50 neighborhood associations supported by Des Moines Neighbors, a local intermediary, provided good "nuts and bolts" capacity building, strategies to identify and support resident leadership were lacking.

"There was no leadership program for residents at the citizen level," says Bridget Montgomery, senior planner for the City of Des Moines. "There were lots of training programs in the city to develop business leadership, but for residents who wanted to step up to the plate and get involved, these didn't offer the right context."

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Former Making Connections Des Moines Site Coordinator

There was, however, a platform on which to build in the city. Des Moines Neighbors had offered classes in resident engagement, and *Making Connections* had provided Resident Leadership Facilitation (RLF) training, developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Leadership Development Unit, to residents in the four neighborhoods the initiative works in. Indeed, RLF graduates continue to play a key role in designing, marketing and teaching certificate program courses.

Additionally, Iowa State University Extension offered programs in non-profit management, and Des Moines Area Community College in volunteerism. While all programming was related to the development of resident leadership, Montgomery says that "we figured out we could do more together."

With support from Donna Stark, Director of Leadership Development and Vice President of Human Development and Operations for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, resident leaders, representatives from *Making Connections*, Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa State University Extension, Des Moines Neighbors, and the City of Des Moines were convened in early 2006 to talk about teaming up to develop a formal curriculum and course of study in resident leadership.

The effort started with an end in mind. Ms. Stark and Making Connections Des Moines partners wanted the program to help resident leaders:

- Gain skills, knowledge, and confidence that enable them to be more effective leaders and contributors at decision-making tables;
- Strengthen their resumes and have credible, marketable evidence of their knowledge and skills;
- Become more familiar with other opportunities available at colleges;
- Have the opportunity to become team teachers at colleges;
- Be able to help academicians learn from their experience, insights and work.

A broad planning group, including resident leaders, the City of Des Moines, Des Moines Neighbors, the Des Moines Area Community College, Making Connections staff, and Iowa State Extension, was formed. Frank Owens, Program Planner with ISU Extension says, "We were always asking if there was anyone else we needed to bring to the table. There was no close mindedness to any potential participant. It was totally open."

Margaret Wright, former *Making Connections* Des Moines site coordinator, says the process reflected a new "way of work" that is emerging in communities where residents, government, schools, and others work together to effect change. . "I think it's becoming a community culture that people realize that they cannot invest in these things on their own. We just kept asking the question 'who would have a stake in this?'"

**II. Framing a curriculum:
Responding to resident priorities and needs**

The process to develop the resident leadership program began with the fundamentals – fully engaging residents in course design and development.

Neighborhood residents were part of the planning team to shape the curriculum’s overall goals and content, and gave crucial feedback to the community college and other partners about types of skills needed to lead community change efforts from the ground up.

While course design was informed by best practices in resident leadership development from around the country, responding to what residents wanted the program to do, in the context of their perspectives and needs, was the overarching priority, said Owens, who also is a resident of the one of the *Making Connections* Des Moines neighborhoods. "How are people living, how do they feel about going to class, how does it impact their lifestyle, and do they have the ability to get there? It's necessary to think of all the aspects of the

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Many of his neighbors needed basic skills to represent their interests at the neighborhood association level, Owens added. “In other neighborhoods, they might facilitate a discussion about wanting to build a website, and then a group would come back with a proposal. But you don’t find that in the (initiative) neighborhoods. There is a definite need for skills and assets,” he says.

Dawn Narcisse, another *Making Connections* resident, had participated in the RLF trainings and the national, biannual gathering of the Casey Foundation’s Resident Leadership Network. Narcisse said she was ready to “think out of the box” with ways to use what she’d learned in RLF and in her work with the Foundation to achieve something concrete. “With *Making Connections* we talk about building assets all of the time, but what does that really mean? ... it means helping me have contacts and giving me skills that make me better than I was before. It boils down to having the skills that can eventually put dollars in my pocket - for me, that is truly building assets,” she says.

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Monica Stovall, the former lead for *Making Connections* resident engagement and leadership efforts, said residents wanted the course to give them the skills to fully participate in local decision-making that impacts their families and neighborhoods.

There are “plenty of residents with raw leadership skills, with the need to hone them.” To prepare them to sit at the same tables as other community leaders, Stovall said classes needed to offer a skill set that any leader or institution in the community could recognize. “This was the chance to give residents formal skills and validate their training through accreditation,” she said.

“I was building my capacity and learning all of these skills, but what did it really mean for me?” said Dayna Chandler, another *Making Connections* resident leader. “We wanted to know what value it had or could have.”

The open process and dialog helped the planning team reach consensus on basic course content. A key decision was to build on existing programs, said Kimberly Hansen, Executive Director of the Des Moines Neighborhood Resource Office. Residents and other members of the planning team “chose some very general classes that offered the kind of basic skills you would need to operate with leadership on a PTA, in a church, or

to volunteer at a homeless shelter. We didn't need to recreate the wheel because there was curriculum out there."

Because the planning process did a good job setting the goals of the programs and defining content, DMACC was able to focus on quickly implementing the program. Julie Bundy, continuing education coordinator for the college, said her role was to help finalize curriculum, "find the instructor and get it ready to roll."

III. Struggles to reach common ground: "A little bit of blood, sweat and tears."

The process sounds fairly straightforward, yet Chandler says that "identifying a curriculum and trying to figure out what needed to be in and what needed to be out was the toughest part" of the process. Many residents were working with the community college and other partners for the first time, and vice versa, and no one in Des Moines had before created this type of formal leadership training program specifically for residents in a higher education setting.

Owens says that getting the course off the ground was only achieved through "a lot of meetings, time, and asking questions of each other. It also took a little bit of blood, sweat, and tears."

Making Connections resident Suzanne Erwin-Holmes acknowledges that "everyone came with turf issues." Yet she also points out that "as we kept meeting and working we found common ground. Everyone wanted it to work so you gave a little and took a little."

The process taught everyone on the planning team valuable lessons about what true partnerships require, said Narcisse. While "collaborations are easy on paper, in actuality they are very difficult and require a lot of patience and understanding – not only on the resident side but on other sides as well."

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Monica Stovall,
Former Making Connections Resident Engagement and Leadership coordinator

Wright added that one of the most unique challenges to the process "were the different values and concepts of what resident engagement was." She said it was important to remember that "all residents don't come packaged in the same association or denomination. Once people got that point, the differences even made the group stronger."

Hansen says that success depended on it being a "true collaborative" where all voices were included. "It takes effort from all the groups who are truly involved in the community. It can't just be one organization who does this...to make it work at this level," she says.

Residents used facilitation skills they learned in RLF to help the group come to consensus – often by keeping an open mind and letting the process work. Chandler said that when she wanted to “hunker in” on a particular point, she’d “release it and try to stay open to find another alternative” that might work better for the group. “You have to be able to listen to each other. It’s important to keep reminding yourselves of the common ground that you share and why you are in the room,” she says.

Determining who would pay for the classes became a major sticking point in moving forward. Stovall says that getting caught up in funding issues had the potential to “kill the vision.” She adds, “As we walked through it and got off of who would pay, it fell together. The fact is that when you have a good vision and a plan, you can sell that to someone.”

Montgomery says that DMAACC “played a more neutral part, which helped.” She said their presence “at the table made it legitimate and gave the process staying power – more so than just some volunteers coming together.”

Yet “none of us could have done it alone,” says Stovall. “Had we not come together we would not have had a well rounded set of classes for a broad base of people...because of everyone, we have a well rounded program that appeals to all audiences.”

Hansen concludes, “This would not have come to fruition if all of the players were not at the table. It is a collaborative in the truest sense. It would not exist without everyone working on it together.”

And while there was satisfaction to be had that a first round of classes was ready for the fall semester in 2007 - less than one year since the idea was proposed - Owens says the partnership that formed to develop the program should continue to refine content, outreach and instruction. “As the process develops you should never think it is at the end - because it is a process,” he says. “We’re lucky to have a very active group of people who are there working together and sharing information, and realizing it’s not over. There is still work to be done.”

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Suzanne Erwin-Holmes
Making Connections
resident leader

IV. The results: Building the capacity of and culture of respect for resident leaders

Within that short year of planning, an instructor was chosen, a curriculum was solidified, scholarships were set up to assist students financially, and classes were marketed in the community. Attendance was at full capacity for the first session, which proved that efforts made in the planning and negotiations paid off. “People worried about getting even 10 students, but the classes

were very well attended,” says Stovall.

Montgomery said that having the community college as the course venue really “gave it the seal of approval that made it a real thing.”

DMACC’s Julie Bundy, who spent time formalizing the structure and logistics to put the classes into motion adds, “The classes are recognized as real and structured, with an attendance requirement and an evaluation. I think that there was an identified need for leadership skills and that was an area where DMACC could pull together with the right instructor.”

“The campus has been very glad to host the classes because the Provost was very interested in being involved in the community,” she says. “There is huge support.”

Wright says the college gained “a stronger, richer program of electives that put them up against any other community college with a similar curriculum. It offers more diversity than a one size fits all approach to education.”

Adds Stovall, “I think the college saw the value in reaching out beyond the typical student – that there is value in reaching out beyond the 2-4 year degree.”

For residents there are already tangible results. Ms. Erwin-Holmes says it put “higher education on their minds and in their spirits. It’s a way of developing people, and I’ve heard several people say they now want to get their (associates degree) or get their student loans cleared up – it’s a launching pad for further education,” she says. “It builds folks up, and they feel that if they can go through this very intensive program maybe they can do more. It’s been a very wonderful thing for the community.”

The first graduate of the full course series was *Making Connections* resident Terry Wells, who immediately got involved in his neighborhood association for the first time in his life, and was elected to an office. “That is an outstanding accomplishment to have as a result,” says Hansen. “It’s really influenced people to get involved in the community.”

Hansen says another *Making Connections* resident who had long-time involvement in her neighborhood association, took the courses and “found some new skills she hadn’t been shown how to access. It was an approach not shown through Making Connections or Des Moines Neighbors that she could only gain by being in the class. Sometimes you get experienced people who do things in one way for so many years, but she learned how to do things differently.”

One east side neighborhood located in the *Making Connections* area called the Fairgrounds had recently been stripped of its neighborhood association status by the city because of some violations on the part several association members. “There had been quite a bit of drama there,” says Montgomery.

Four residents from the Fairgrounds took the classes and wanted to create a new association, which the city agreed to recognize. "To see this happen was one of the things about these classes that excites me the most." says Montgomery.

Narcisse said her skills and those of other residents had a greater chance to develop throughout the process. "You had residents coming to the table and having confidence that their voice was weighed. People learned how to negotiate, and how deals were done. These were skills that would take them further into their careers. For me that was the totally awesome piece, because we talk about building skills and now we're showing them."

Now serving in a supervisory position in Des Moines' Boys and Girls Club, Narcisse says her training has helped her in her new role "from day one."

"The facilitation piece has really helped me. You walk into a new job and you're the new guy and there are stresses. It helped me to understand team work and put collaboration into everyday use."

Chandler saw residents furthering their influence in the community, and expanding the role of *Making Connections*. "For me it was all about building these partnerships locally - to see a group of reputable institutions, and how residents were going to contribute and put some weight and merit behind that was a win for the community around *Making Connections*. If we are able to bend the ear of powerful institutions that have influence and get them involved and interested and intrigued, it will only serve the community better."

Wright was reminded of the true focus on collaboration that the effort brought forth. "I'm regularly seeing this brochure in many, many different venues throughout the community - even in places I never would have expected. So who gets to take the credit for this? Each party does, and they've all done a lot to acknowledge each other! It's a true collaboration that brought folks to the table, looked at their strengths, saw what they offered - and then they spoke as one voice."

V: Conclusion: Emerging Lessons for other sites

As of this writing, Indianapolis, San Antonio, Louisville and Providence were among the *Making Connections* sites also looking to partner with community colleges and other stakeholders to launch formal resident leadership certificate programs.

"Developing clear pathways for residents who want to take up leadership in their communities was already a legacy of *Making Connections*' work in Des Moines and other sites," said Stark. "The collaboration with community colleges and other partners to create a certificate program anchors those pathways by giving resident leadership training a permanent and influential home in sites."

In addition, certificate programs create an entry point for deeper partnerships with community colleges and universities for other work, such as assuring that children in the Making Connections neighborhoods are healthy and prepared to succeed in school, and that their parents are connected to family supporting jobs. For example, community colleges can also offer certificate programs in early childhood development and provide job training to link residents from low-income neighborhoods to high growth job sectors – work that DMACC also is doing with major employers in Des Moines as part of a major reform of the region’s workforce development system.

Speaking to the Association of Community College Trustees in 2006, Casey Foundation Executive Vice President Ralph Smith said development of resident leadership programs by community colleges is especially important because “it helps those who live, work and worship in these communities have the skill to participate as co-owners of the work to change neighborhood conditions and improve outcomes for children and families,” Smith also pointed to development certification programs at community colleges for childcare providers as a vital way “to address the challenge of improving child care delivered by family, friends and neighbors. Community colleges are providing a way for these providers to move out of the shadows and away from the margins.”

“Yet successful collaborations with community colleges and other partners to develop formal certificate programs in resident leadership and other areas require patience and persistence,” said Caroline Gaston, a consultant who works with the Casey Foundation’s Leadership Development Unit and Technical Assistance Resource Center.

Sites are challenged not only to get residents involved as part of planning from day one, but also to “cast a broad net for who the players are in any community and sort it down to who will stay with it and involved in it,” said Gaston. “A lot of different cultures have to work together -- residents, the city, the community colleges, and neighborhoods groups. They all need to feel they are doing important work together.”

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